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PETER ARNO'S HULLABALOO

"—— Muh-h-ther-r-r Muh-chree-e-e ——"

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Peter Arno's HULLABALOO

HORACE LIVERIGHT

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A NOTE ON PICTORIAL HUMOR

by

Robert Benchley

READERS of the humorous weeklies, lolling about in their debilitating hot baths or toppling off luxurious club divans, have no idea of the sadness and heartaches which go into the fashioning of the little jokes which they thumb over so carelessly. It is not generally known, I believe, that one comic-weekly editor dies every eighteen minutes, or, at any rate, feels simply awful.

It is not generally known, either, that about five years ago these harassed editors faced a situation so grave as to threaten the very existence of illustrated joke-making as a national industry. The newspaper comic-strip, with its "Bams" and "Pows" and "Glubs," had swept everything before it, and the weeklies, hampered by such Victorian restrictions as good printing and careful draughtsmanship, had nothing with which to meet this attack but their old "He-and-She" joke. (The "He-and-She" joke will be easily identified as the one in which He said something and She made a comical crack in reply—or vice versa. It was varied only by sometimes calling the two characters "Boggs" and "Scroggs" or "Mr. Gotrocks" and "Mr. Sapleigh.")

The "He-and-She" joke had, in its day (*circa* 1900) been pretty fairly revolutionary, but after twenty-five years of Boggsing and Scroggsing,

had lost its vitality. It had been the leader in the great Anti-"Punch" *putsch* of the early twentieth century and had reduced the wordage of joke-telling by easily ninety per cent. You will remember, if your uncle had any bound volumes of "Punch" when you were a child, that Du Maurier had established a school in which the joke under the picture was amplified to gargantuan proportions by the introduction of a mass of italicized type-matter in parentheses, so that we not only got a two-line gag (usually terrible), but also a preliminary take-off such as:

> "Old Party (*who is returning from the club a little 'the worse for wear' and who feels it necessary to explain to the Bobby on duty at the corner of the street that he has been sitting up with a sick friend but who has not the necessary command of language to make himself intelligible even to an intimate acquaintance, much less the Bobby, who is naturally slightly confused*)."

Then came the first part of the gag.

"Punch" still clings a little to this form of reader-help, but the "He-and-She" joke made us free here in America and we must think back a little more kindly on it for this service. After twenty-five years, however, of "What did your wife say last night?" and "Ethel, hasn't that young man gone yet?" with appropriate answers, the old veteran threatened to become a public-charge and eat us out of house and home. The only trouble was that we couldn't think of anything else to do his work.

I remember, as short a time ago as 1925, sitting in an emergency conference with the tired, irritable editors of a humorous weekly, confronted by a pile of drawings for which jokes had to be found. One of the more far-sighted of the board arose and, passing a hand over his damp brow, said in a low voice:

"Men, the He-and-She joke must go! If we are to meet the 'funnies' in any kind of array, we must devise some new method of throwing our read-

ers into spasms of laughter. Let each one go home and fast and pray, and come back on Monday with some suggestion as to how we can get rid of Boggs and Scroggs." Then he fainted.

But fasting and praying did no good. We could devise nothing. We tried calling Boggs and Scroggs "First Mechanic" and "Second Ice-skater," but it was merely a stop-gap. We tried adding a third line to the conventional two, a line making no sense, but that soon became a formula without humor. So far as I can remember, none of us ever thought of making the joke just one line long.

Little as we realized it, however, we were on the brink of a revolution. With the advent of *The New Yorker,* and with the *New Yorker,* Peter Arno, the entire technique of picturized jokes underwent a sudden and complete change. The old, feeble two-line joke practically disappeared, and, in its place, came a fresh and infinitely more civilized form—the illustrated single remark. It had, of course, been used in a desultory fashion before, but its possibilities had never been even dreamed of. To see one of Peter Arno's illustrations of a one-line observation made by a dowager in a theater-lobby or a young man in a porch hammock is to realize that, so long as people go on saying incongruous or pompous things, this young man will never lack for oysters, for the world is his.

Peter Arno may not have been the first to make use of the overheard remark as a basis for a drawing, but he has made himself the High Priest of the school by now. Probably nine hundred people a day say to themselves (and to Mr. Arno): "That would make a swell Arno drawing." But it is not so simple as that. An Arno drawing has something more to it than the illustration of a remark, and it is something which only Peter Arno himself understands. I myself have joined in the throng who make suggestions to Mr. Arno and he has received them with a charming show of enthusiasm and a cryptic notation on the back of an envelope. But, as I have waited in vain for them to appear in *The New Yorker,* I have come to realize that he is right. They were not ideas for an Arno drawing. They may have been ideas for *some*one's

drawings, but not for Arno's. And he knew it. Which is why this book is as remarkable as it is.

Anyone attempting to analyze the Arno spirit should, aside from being shot down cold, remember that among his earliest works were the Whoops Sisters. These, even more than the introduction of the one-line joke, were the red, red revolutionists of the joke world. As sinister and macabre a pair of middle-aged ladies as ever were created (they always brought to mind the inmates of the *maison de fou* in the Grand Guignol who chattered horribly from one bed to another), they had no ancestors in American humor and are likely to have no descendants. When they bounded, with their muffs and horrid hats, from the pages of *The New Yorker* fifty years of picturized joking in this country toppled over with a crash.

Since tucking the Whoops Sisters away in the Home for Nicely Inebriated Ladies, Mr. Arno has acquired a more formal note of social criticism, but the faint air of madness reminiscent of those gay girls remains. His devastating cracks at purple majors and ponderous dowagers, as well as at the younger and more physically active denizens of the smart and theatrical sets, have more in them than merely a bitterness at pomposity and fakes. There is a glint of madness in every eye that he draws. Unlike most humorists who are hailed as "concealing in their fun-making a hatred of hyprocricy and sham," Peter Arno conceals in his "hatred of hypocricy and sham," a transcendental quality of dementia which amounts to genius.

But here I go getting analytical myself! If ever a book didn't need an analytical preface, or any preface at all, it is this one. Even the most casual skimming over its pages will convince you of more than anything I have been struggling to say. In fact, you are crazy if you have waited to read this far.

Robert Benchley.

PETER ARNO'S HULLABALOO

"See, darling, I told you we couldn't have a Platonic friendship."

"Wait, I call de butler. He knows more den I do."

"Er—is that you, Gwendolyn? I believe this is our dance, Gwendolyn."

"Gad! My wife looks terrible to-night!"
"Sir! You are speaking of the woman I love!"

"My god! We're out of gin!"

"Flirt!"

Peter
Alma

"But my deah, deah girl—you're getting offen the subject."

"We want to report a stolen car."

"I'm so happy. Dear Elbert tells me he's found a suitable position at last. He's on the Jury."

" I think I'll go as Clara Bow—you know, the 'It' girl."

Long Beach

"Let's not lose our tempers, sir!"

"Damn this black carpet! I never can find my socks."

"Why, auntie! You've got your hat on. Are you going out?"

"Well, we can't start till we get that robin out of there."

Peter Arno

"Whattaya—hot?"
"Naw—sweet."

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but this gentleman would like to have another look at the apartment."

"Ah, Major—How's your wooden leg?"

"—and I may tell you, in strictest confidence—"

Broadway and 42nd.

"Good night, Mrs. Parker. It's been perfectly charming."

"Are you sure you put that damn cat out?"

"No tricks now!"

"Please, sweetheart, don't spoil my dream!"

"Tip over?"

"Just one little kiss—to remember you by."

"I just stepped out a minute to get the milk, dear."

"Naturally you write better than I can. You've travelled. You know life."

"Morning, dear—what's new?"

"Would you mind handing me the end of my tippet?"

"Good God! I forgot to get favors for the men!"

"Did I ever tell you about *my* experience?"

"Oh, redskin!"

"My God—what expression!"

"Well, make up your mind!"

"All I wear under this is my underwear."

"Ella and I certainly appreciate your hospitality, Mrs. Creighton."

"Why, Vicar, y'know, I thought of asking you to my party, an' then I thought 'Oh what the hell!' "

"It's done, Frank—Junior's all told."
"Told what?"
"You know—all about the flowers."

"You great big man! Where've you been all my life?"
"Oswego."

"C-c-could you lend me t-t-ten dollars till this t-t-talkie thing b-b-blows over?"

Floor Show

TROY
GALVESTON
Peter Arno

"Wake up, you mutt! We're getting married to-day."

Drawing

"I sort of lost my temper with this one."

"Come as my guest—it won't cost you a cent."

"Now stop and think a minute—did *I* bite you?"

VAN CORTLANDT PK.
DAILY
CHILD
SLAIN
P.A.

"There's that cerise wrap again. I don't believe he has another rag to his name."

"You're married, aren't you?"

P.A.

"Sh-h-h—I've been coquetting with La Flamme since a quarter past the hour."

"Have you a penthouse suitable for a small dog and myself?"

"May I?"

"Cornered, by Gad!"

Celery

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"Getting out, please."

"Action! More action! Show him that you love him!"

"Cadwallader *always* comes through."

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